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ABSTRACT

Worklife has accumulated information about what employees want in career development support. Education starts by illustrating that career development is about developing the current job and seeking the next. Employees eagerly take responsibility for their career management, but feel they need considerable employer support, especially regarding self-assessment tools. Employees assemble data about preferred skills; career values; primary wants at current career and life stages; belief system; motivated interests; and desired new learning. Workshops are the most popular form of employer-sponsored career support. A challenge for employers is to evaluate and select self-help career planning software. Managers need help to become effective career coaches. Employees who have been inspired to undertake career exploration within their current employment environment must be able to approach people who provide information frankly. A significant majority of employees want more variety in their job tasks--new learning. Employees falter at the decision-making stage. A mentor support program has substantially improved employee and employer results. Employees should be encouraged to investigate and target jobs currently occupied; succession matrices can be maintained. Career development programs may fail if they do not address these issues. Managers are needed who persuade, not give orders; know how to coach and build consensus; and add value by negotiating job assignments with people. (YLB)

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What Works and What Doesn't in Career Development Programs

Paul Stevens

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What Works and What Doesn't in Career Development Programs

by Paul Stevens, Founder / Director, The Centre for Worklife Counselling

Career development is currently a topic under considerable scrutiny by HRM and Training professionals. Both seek interventions and learning experiences which will help staff adjust to the new era of maintaining their employability rather than long-term tenure.

Career support programs have experienced fluctuating fortunes. Many people, usually at Executive level, dismissed them as too 'new age' or 'touchy feely', or an indulgence in the employees' direction rather than improving organisational productivity and effectiveness. Several well-meaning people battled this resistance and proceeded with career support workshops, only to be disappointed when achievement of objectives appeared confused or participants did not take responsibility for their own career growth. Among this group were many who did not realise that workshops are not necessarily the best vehicle for helping staff with their career enrichment responsibilities.

Program Renaissance

Many factors have contributed to a renaissance of career development support activities by employers. Career development has been selected by many employers as the learning vehicle by which the post-restructuring new organisational culture can be communicated and staff cooperation secured. The drastic adjustments to their infrastructure and personnel require different ways of getting job tasks done. Working smarter and creative thinking and acting are the emerging expectations from management. Some organisations are reflecting these changes by shredding all job descriptions, believing these restrain rather than free up their human resource capabilities.

Other contributing factors are the revision in meaning of the employment relationship, the initiative of staff who observed downsizing with increasing concern and took on the determination to improve their employability whilst others around them were losing theirs, and the growth of competencies, rather than qualifications, with its associated vocabulary of definitions increasing as a measure of a person's suitability for a job role, or transfer or promotion.

Instead of creating loyalty which, by association implies longevity in the partnership between employer and employee, staff need to become more entrepreneurial, committed to lifelong learning and no longer expect promotions to be handed to them as a reward. Neither employee nor employer has a future obligation to the other. Pay is earned today in whatever job role by contributing to the organisation's changing needs in winning customers, then maintaining and growing this relationship by providing better service and innovation in products and delivery standards. If the employer fails to meet market needs, there is no longer an implied promise of next month's salary being paid into the bank account.

More employers are recognising that, for their staff to respond favourably to these demands, they require a different form of security, in addition to pay. They are choosing education in career self-resiliency as the methodology to convey it.

What Works and What Doesn't

Over the past 22 years, Worklife has accumulated a great deal of information about what employees want in career development support and what is economical for employers to invest in and provide.

Worklife has been providing career and life planning services since 1979. Recent innovations are Worklife's CareerMastery®, a virtual career self-help centre at http://www.careermastery.com and the College for Career Practitioners, an eLearning facility at http://www.worklife.com.au/learning/index.html

What is career development for employees? How do staff define it and what are they really looking for within such programs? Fortunately, we have much to share to help find the answers, as we have stood in front of and alongside so many employees in both group learning settings and one-to-one career and worklife advisory support situations. Also, at Worklife, we have enjoyed many satisfying partnerships with HRM and Training professionals on the staff of our client organisations pooling observations and debating these issues at length. The synergy between consultant and client has been empowering for both parties in an area of knowledge about people at work which covers behavioural science, psychology, sociology and commerce and where formally documented theories about adult career development only date back to 1974.

Where to Start

In all our in-company programs we have found it necessary to define career development for employees. So many have a singular belief that career development concerns only their future — i.e. their next — job move. Our education starts by illustrating that career development is as much about developing their current job as seeking the next one. Career development is as much about work and life balance and, therefore, life management as about relationships with colleagues, current boss and employer.

Furthermore, we found a very low incidence of awareness of how to undertake career review. This should not be surprising, as our secondary and tertiary education institutions fail to include student training in career and life planning in their syllabi. At present, it's left to employers to provide the education which was omitted in their employees' younger years.

Assuming Ownership

We found ample evidence of the willingness of employees to undertake career development once this education had taken place. Most initially perceived career development as activities you take when an unexpected event of a negative nature occurs, such as threat to or loss of job. Bookshops are now stocked with an extensive array of literature — texts, planning workbooks, self-review materials. Yet our random survey of bookshop staff reveals that purchasers invariably buy the job hunt materials and bypass the self-review and career targeting offerings. Buyers are into career transition help and vaulting — or deliberately avoiding — the self-review, exploration and planning steps.

The readiness of employees to participate when an employer offers self-review and planning help can be regarded as a benefit extrapolating from the recession years. Rarely do we find an employee who has not lost their job through redundancy, or not know a family member or friend who has. This contributes to an acceptance that career protection can only be done by the individual. They are eager learners as a consequence.

This career education helps in other ways. For example, we found in post-recession career training much less blaming the employer or 'the system' than pre-recession. What we have noticed is that more time needs to be given to settling down participants' fears that the commencement of this form of help by their employer has a hidden agenda. 'It's a disguised form of outplacement,' some say. This reflects the breakdown in trust and former feelings of safe dependency on their employer.

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Partnership with Employer

Employees make it clear many times that, while they are eager to take over responsibility for their career management, they feel that they cannot do it without considerable support from their employer. They express the need for many things — some realistic, others not. It's part of the career education process to teach what is a realistic expectation of support and what the employee can achieve by self-help.

Self-Assessment Tools

The highest expectation by employees for employer support is for tools for the employee to assess themselves — to gather the essential database from which career planning can proceed. In this area, many shared negative views on tests or psychometric instruments, or inventories — where they completed them, had their responses taken way and received a report back 'telling me who I am'. Resentment has been exception-

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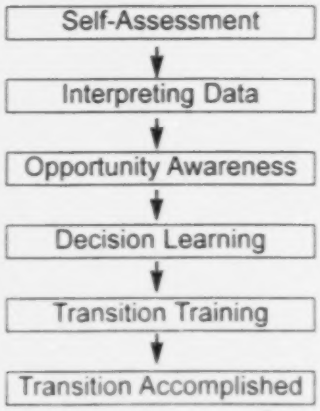
ally strong about these processes, and trainers and recruitment officers should take note and reassess which tools they are administering. We have observed that bad feelings about tests linger.

At Worklife, our career counselling and career training team has long been aware that tests are inappropriate tools. We have developed expertise in and, in fact, designed many Career Assessment Instruments. 'CAIs', as we commonly refer to them, are essentially self-assessment tools. We have also developed and refined many Structured Questionnaires to help the Self-Assessment phase. The other need is for an overview framework for the career sort out process. An example is in Figure 1: The Stevens' Model.

Figure 1: Stevens' Model of Career Development



Career Planning Database

What comprises the minimum database from which career planning can take place? Our experience is that each employee needs to assemble self-selected data about: their preferred or motivated skills; their career values; their primary wants at the current stage of their career and life; an appraisal of their career action constraints — their belief system; their motivated interests; and conclude with documenting their desired new learning. What is least useful are personality inventories which produce confining labels such as 'thruster-negotiator' and the like.

Self-Assessment Accuracy

Several HRM professionals and managers query the ability of an employee to self-assess accurately. I recommend that a perusal of Adult Career Development literature and research findings will provide considerable reassurance about this.

Preferences for Learning Media

Workshops are the most popular form of employer-sponsored career support. We share a strong caution here. People learn in different ways. The medium of a small group training event does not appeal to all. Some fear being forced into uncomfortable self-disclosure. The skill of the learning facilitator is paramount here. Furthermore, the career subject is very much a personal one. Many want privacy, particularly through the Self-Assessment and Opportunity Awareness stages.

Within AGC, the finance company, 738 (48%) of the employee population volunteered for workshops within the first six months. We learned that it would be wrong to assume 52% did not care about their careers. Many of the 52% keenly pursued this knowledge using other media, quietly and unobtrusively.

We have found that many employees can learn and self-manage their way by accessing structured career planning workbooks, employer-sponsored career self-help libraries or comprehensive software systems either intranet- or internet-based.

Often, when an employee has used one or more of these, they are more willing and, in fact, eager to enrol in a workshop learning event. . Similarly, we have found that workshop graduates frequently move on to these other career support resources for further work and/or reinforcement of their developing career-related thoughts.

The best option is for an employer to offer a range of career support learning media selected from electronic, print and face-to-face delivery options.

Whatever the components of an employer's career support system, it is our experience that any compelled use of them will result in inappropriate career development behaviours by employees and poor return on the employer's investment. Essentially, all career development support must be offered as an invitation to employees for their voluntary participation.

Electronic Systems

Conditioned by the delivery speed of Internet and Intranet, a high percentage of employees expect a 'quick-fix' to their career issues. Developers have responded to this and a growing number of career software systems are on offer. The challenge for employers is to evaluate and decide between quick fix 'glitzy' systems and those which offer an educational and process-oriented methodology. Perhaps the

answer is that for a part of the employee population the quick fix but low sustainability of outputs is suitable but for higher levels of career self-management the latter is needed. Graduate recruits, 'fast track' staff, special populations, the career conscientious, expatriate staff and managers are more likely to be attracted to the process content style with structured learning elements which result in more thorough personal career decision making.

Dr Wendy Hirsh of University of Sussex completed comprehensive research into Self-Help Career Planning Tools, published as a report in July 2001 via Career Research Forum in UK (http://www.CRForum.co.uk) and included the following about what employers should look for:

"Clear and robust basis for the package building on well-researched theories and using well tested exercises or instruments.

- Documentation explaining the product, how to use it and the theoretical basis and validity of exercises / instruments.
- If on the Web, the web site should make clear who is providing the site and for what purpose and provide a clear site map.
- Language tuned to the needs of employees, their career realities and their varied levels of 'readiness' for career development.
- A style that encourages reflection rather than exercise hopping. The opportunity to synthesise several exercises together.
- Ability to include or link to organisationally specific information and processes (e.g. general job information and internal job vacancies, descriptions of appraisal and on-line appraisal forms, training directories and booking training courses etc.)
- The more complex the package, the more important is a clear internal structure and the ability to see the shape of the whole package. Two level structures are common (main modules and sub-modules). The whole two-level menu for users should be visible as an overview on one screen.
- Navigation needs to be easy and very robust to user error. Test by seeing how easy it is to get back to where you started and to switch between main modules. Also test how fast you get used to navigating and how quick it feels to use. If on the Web, check the speed of moving from page to page in the environment where employees will be using it.
- Where significant text is included, it should be easy to switch between a practical tool or exercise and relevant explanation, articles, tips etc. Large collections of text need to be easy to 'browse' as one would browse books on a library shelf. If on the Web, page design and search facilities are key.
- It should be easy to print off exercises (whether completed or blank), profiles, jottings and explanatory text.
- The system must preserve confidentiality of personal data. Users should be able to save their own data securely and use it on future occasions. The facility to pull this data into other formats (e.g. standard word processing files) is helpful."

Worklife has met Dr Hirsh's requirements in Worklife's CareerMastery at:

http://www.careermastery.com

Workshop Design

We have experimented with many formats over the years. Our more effective results come from a design which allows for two consecutive days to be followed by a follow-up day at least five but no more than eight weeks later. This gives time for much to happen. The employee reflects on the education and the self-assessment data surfaced and documented, undertakes self-initiated career exploration, gathers data, consults and drafts options, concurrent with carrying out their current job responsibilities.

Our experience is that managers need to experience the career education and self-assessment tuition themselves before they want to learn career coaching.

Because employees harbour lingering feelings of distrust of their employers, more effective learning occurs when an external career trainer leads the process with an internal trainer as co-facilitator rather than lead spokesperson. Furthermore, a setback can easily occur if the managing director decides to open the workshop proceedings!

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He or she is best kept out of the way, but not left uninformed!

Manager as Career Coach

Because of the personal nature of career and life review, it is unreasonable to expect all employees to involve their manager willingly from Stage One onwards. Employees accept that at some stage, preferably no later than Stage Four: Decision Learning, they need to consult their manager. However, if this relationship is forced, they often abandon any further work on their own career planning.

Because of this, managers need help in how to be effective career coaches. Our experience is that managers need to undergo the career education and self-assessment tuition themselves before they want to learn career coaching. In other words, they want their own career needs serviced first. We have observed this makes them more willing to help subordinates through supportive career coaching behaviours.

Career Exploration

We have found many employees welcoming the changed employment environment as they progress through the elements of a career support program. They are not all seeking published career path information, preferring to become detectives and sleuth out among organisational needs where their interests and skills may best be applied. As there is no longer job security, many seem to have been given permission to strike out and consider career moves away from the linear and traditional. As one said to us: "There's something more exciting about not knowing exactly what's going to happen next."

Others, though, expect the old system's supply of organisational charts and publicised job vacancies. They expect details of career opportunities to be delivered to their desks. It will be no surprise that we have found the latter attitudes prevalent at the beginning of career programs and the more adventurous emerging at the conclusion of the career education process.

When employees have been inspired to undertake their own career exploration within their current employment environment, it is essential that they can approach people who will provide information frankly. Exploration or Stage Three: Opportunity Awareness must take place before Decision Learning. People receiving information-gathering requests should not be reticent because they fear their own job safety. They should, however, recognise the evidence of these career action initiatives by colleagues and do their own future employability action taking.

Rejuvenating the Plateaued

It is pleasing to observe an older person keen to experiment with different job tasks and problem-solving issues rather than seeking to stay cocooned in work they know so well, having mastered it but no longer finding it stimulating. Many a mature aged employee who viewed themselves as having plateaued, has been rejuvenated in spirit, action and determination as a result of career development support.

Multi-Tasking Preferences

A significant majority of employees hanker after more variety in their job tasks. They want new learning, though what they want to learn differs from person to person. Employers should be more courageous here. An excellent example is the Prince of Wales, Prince Henry and South Sydney Hospitals where, under their program, cleaners, catering staff, porters and ward assistants have been encouraged to become multi-skilled to work as patient services assistants. Old, confining job titles have been abandoned. This program has saved $1.7 M in annual cleaning bills, as well as improving patient care and employee satisfaction.

HR Monthly confirmed this trend by reporting a survey of 1,300 employees within a Queensland employer which found task variety to be the strongest predictor of job satisfaction.

A significant majority of employees hanker after more variety in their job tasks. They want new learning.

This is the new form of job security — expanded employability by extending the mastery of skills. We have found large numbers of employees wanting this but feeling frustrated by management insisting on expertise delineation the old way. But first we have to help them explore themselves in a non-threatening way and surface their array of skills, many of which they were not conscious of beforehand.

Coping With Uncertainty

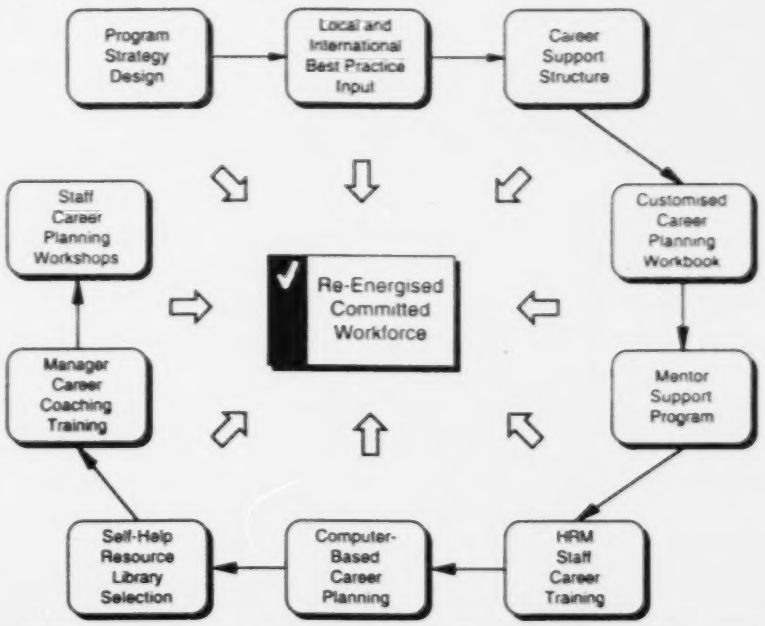
We have found much evidence that once an employee's employability confidence and personal career self-management expertise have been increased, they are less apprehensive about future organisational change. They feel secure that they have compiled data about themselves which they can use to identify a set of work tasks in any reasonable amount of change which could be forthcoming. And, if they are unable to find a match where they work, they know that they have wider options than before in the labour market externally.

Career Decision Making

While we have found, in general, that employees of all ages have been willing to get going with the self-review and exploration process, we have observed the employee falter a multitude of times at the stage of decision making. That's why in our Model we have titled this stage 'Decision Learning'. Here the employee needs the most help. They have produced a number of realistic options — choices of career action steps that relate to who they are and where they work. They falter when a choice has to be made. The commitment to one course of action deters most. One-to-one counselling support is very useful here, as is sensitive coaching from one's manager. Another source of support is accessing a mentor either within or external to the employment environment.

Mentoring Support

We have found that including in the systems approach to career development support a voluntary access and select-your-own-mentor or career coach service has substantially improved the results for both the employee and the employer. We have found it important to provide specific training for the mentors. When employees have had their mentors chosen for them, we have observed far from satisfactory results. An alternative support is to engage the service of an external career counselling provider for contracted mentoring. On a controlled basis, employees can be funded to such a service and helped over this barrier through to successful implementation of their career determinations.



In none of the organisational environments we have conducted these programs have the Line Managers or HRM staff been inundated with requests for promotion.

A Deluge of Promotion Petitions

No, definitely not. In none of the organisational environments we have conducted these programs have the Line Managers or HRM staff been inundated with requests for promotion. What has surfaced in volume is approval seeking for enriching current job.

We influence employees to document their determinations in the form of a Career Action Step Proposal for review by their manager. This document must clearly indicate what the person is seeking, why they think they merit it, what benefit to the employer will result and, most essential, what the person is prepared to contribute to help the request be realised.

Downshifting Features

In some situations, we have observed downshifting requests emanating from this process. People who want less responsibility and have now found the courage to risk requesting it. Often it is sought for a defined period which may be stimulated by birth of a child in their family or other non-work wishes or occurrences. These people should not be considered as no

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longer ambitious. They are exercising work and life balance prerogatives and should be encouraged. No shame should be associated with well-reasoned requests of this nature. It is better for the business to concur as the alternative is losing the person to another employer.

Let's Delay Until Restructuring Is Over

Our knowledge says the opposite. It is amidst times of change within the employment environment that career development support is most wanted and useful to both employees and employers. They ride out the hiccups of changed status, allocation of tasks, etc. better.

A common misinterpretation is that employees need settled jobs on the organisation chart in order to career plan. That is not the case.

A common misinterpretation is that employees need settled jobs on the organisation chart in order to make a career plan. That is not the case. What they need is a set of specifications about themselves about composites of job content that will fit their uniqueness. They need to be aware of the wonder and usefulness of transferable skills and the critical aspect of their attitude. They need to have a sense of career resiliency. These are the outcomes of career development programs in times of change. As one Managing Director said to me recently: "I know I will have to change the organisation structure more than once in the next year. Trouble is I will not know how until the time arrives and I worry that staff will not respond quickly to changed roles but quit the ship physically or mentally when all I am doing is making it safer for them."

Job Vacancy Posting Insufficient

Proposals for career moves should not be discouraged, nor should they wait until vacancies occur and jobs need to be filled. An employee should be encouraged to investigate and target jobs currently occupied. When their plans are communicated, HRM functions can maintain succession matrices laterally and hierarchically. This resembles a chessboard matrix and is best managed by software programs.

In this way, implementation of organisational change can be expedited and selection for expected and unexpected vacancies promptly effected. HRM knows for most, if not all, jobs who wants what and has a good case submitted to be considered.

We have found employees are often discouraged by the difficulty of finding out detailed information about job requirements where jobs are occupied. The tendency is to publicise such data only when a job is vacant. How can a person plan their development if they do not know the requirements of their target? They are prevented from doing their 'homework'. Economic hazards occur for both parties if employees are not saved from inadvertently targeting and going into poorly fitting jobs. More openness by employers is required here.

Bottom Up Succession Planning

In my former career as a Personnel Manager over 20 years, I managed succession planning top down. My responsibility was to maintain confidential recording of who would succeed whom, if need be, and liaise with the Chief Executive on this. Modern career development practice does not supersede this but adds an opposite dimension. When employees are stimulated to submit their short- and long-term goals in Career Action Step Proposals, management has a better idea of who wants what. The system I formerly operated only conjectured at the preferences of the individual. We were often wrong and discovered our error only when the time came to act on job moves.

Worklife has yet to see an organisation operate their succession planning fully in this 'bottom up' manner, but several of our client companies are moving towards this.

Why Some Career Development Programs Fail

Some fail because they often focus on the needs of only a portion of the employee population within an organisation; because they rely on inadequate methods of self-assessment measurement; because they avoid a systems approach and instead have focused on only one or two bits and pieces; because they depend on career workshops as the only learning media; because the Executive team has not been a part of the consultative process before implementation; because performance appraisal discussions have been mixed in with career review discussions.

Today's organisation is a far cry from the authoritarian verti-

cal hierarchy in which I learned personnel management — my first profession. The cross-functional ties among individuals and business units are increasingly important. There are many more channels of activity and communication laterally within than before.

Employers need managers who are better at persuading than giving orders, who know how to coach and build consensus; who add value by negotiating job assignments with people

Managerial skill demands are changing. Employers need managers who are better at persuading than giving orders, who know how to coach and build consensus; who add value by negotiating job assignments with people, not presiding over 'parishes of power' and directing who goes where.

The focus is outwards to the customer. Human resources to service the market will vote with their feet unless their desires are heard, attention given to their individuality and their changing needs as they traverse their adult years in employment. Career change needs to be facilitated more within so that an employee does not feel they have no choice but to resign to seek elsewhere fulfilment of their changed needs, motivations and interests.

The younger generation is being more discriminating when choosing an employer. They are deciding on evidence that comprehensive career development programs exist or they don't. Shortly, the employer who can not advertise they have one will lose out on quality applicants.

Customised Programs Essential

At Worklife, we have made our full share of misjudgments in career development design. We don't know it all! But our wealth of experiences and our consultative partnerships with many employers help us to be much more confident in the pragmatism of our advice. We have seen the power of carefully planned career development program design enacting change more effectively than most other human resource type interventions. To date, our work has extended into the following industries: card services, finance, banking, information systems, consultancy, insurance, government employ, office equipment, telecommunications, pharmaceuticals, food production, professional associations, building materials — each have their own nuances.

Packaged approaches to career development do not work. Each has to be tailored to suit the nature of the employment environment. Human behaviour is the same, the context in which those behaviours function and respond differs.

I will long remember a young woman pulling me aside and saying:

"Thank you for helping this butterfly find her true colours."

When a person is helped to know who they really are and to like themselves better, both the employee and employer benefit.

This article is published in the interests of promoting best practice in the provision of support to adults in their career management and life transitions and to enhance their contributions to those who employ them.

Other monographs in this series:

- Bottom Up Succession Planning Works Better
- The Worklife Methodology: A Framework for Career Transition Making
- Career Self-Help Centres: An HRM Initiative with Distinct ROI
- Gaining Commitment to Change through Career Coaching
- Strategies for Electronic Career Support to Employees
- Why Career Planning Can't Be Hurried
- Portfolio Careerism: Are You Ready?

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